[From "Die Männerinsel" pp99-113]

The Prison Ship on the Thames 1915.

'*London-Putney, May 1915*'

When I came out early from the bathroom on Ascension Day,[i] I told Mrs. Pay that two gentlemen from the police had just called round, and they had asked me to be ready for the following day at eleven o'clock. At first, I thought that Mrs. Pay was the one who had notified the police: that came from my reading of terrible witch-hunt articles in the *Daily Mail*, saying that all enemy aliens, even if nationalised, should be locked up immediately. The mobs were out and already wrecking shops again. Shots have been fired on the streets. 'The Huns are flashing lights up to the Zeppelins, so they can to choke London with gas-bombs and poison-bombs.' Things have got so bad that the nets of imprisonment are closing up tighter and tighter. I'm going to write Alberta a farewell letter and pack my things. Proper imprisonment with fellow-companions in suffering and sentiment is what I prefer to this unbearable loneliness and this cockeyed situation. I shall keep my inner freedom to myself, as I did before.

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'*Southend-on-Sea, H.M.T.*[ii] *Royal Edward, May 1915*'

I slept badly that night, and got up early to pack all my things. On the stroke of eleven, a friendly man in civilian clothes turned up. I told him that I wanted to be repatriated to Germany or to the United States, where my grandfather had citizenship. He replied that with regard to this, I could lodge a complaint. I also took this current volume of my diary with me in my hand luggage: I had packed the other ones up, and had asked Mrs. Pay to keep them in safe-keeping, and then later to send them on to an address I would give to her. The kind-hearted lady wept when we parted. At the police station in Wandsworth I was told that at two o'clock I would be moved on to a steamer, along with the group being transported to Southend. The detective, who was quite friendly, told me on the journey by Underground, which went all through London to Fenchurch Street Station, [p. 100] about his experiences in Belgium, where he said he had been an eye-witness to dreadful events. I invited the chap to lunch in Bishop's Restaurant; then he accompanied me along the platform through a cordon of soldiers with fixed bayonets into the waiting room and took his leave.

Now things had become serious, even to external eyes I was now a prisoner! The waiting room was packed out with five hundred other prisoners and their luggage, who, following the witch-hunt by the Northcliffe Press, had been picked up in a raid. This was the act of revenge for the *Lusitania*. German waiters, barbers, musicians and dock-workers provided the greatest contingent, all the dialects of Germany and Austria suddenly rang around my disaccustomed ear and generated a feeling of being home. The men had been waiting here since early morning, and the smoke from all the many pipes and cigarettes obscured the room. I, too, stuck a Player's Navy Cut in my mouth and asked for a match, and in this way got into conversation with an erstwhile City clerk. In the meantime the special train had arrived, and in front of every compartment there stood a menacing soldier on watch with fixed bayonet. Ten of us crushed ourselves up into one compartment, sitting opposite me was a dwarf, a complete cripple; I wondered how he had managed to have had anything to do with the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Going past the Tower, the symbol of medieval English deprivation of liberty, which had, however, been more pernicious to the great and grand of this earth than to the innocent lesser brethren, our train travelled along the north bank of the Thames, out towards the east. Two buskers pulled out their guitars and played: *It's a long way to Tipperary*, but an elderly man, unsmiling, told them that this English pub-chorus was not really the right music to go with us on our journey into captivity. Instead, he took a manuscript out of his coat-pocket, and asked people to listen to a poem, which he said he had written the previous night. We asked him to read it out, and we listened, [p. 101] over the rattle of the wheels, becoming more and more unsmiling.

'Robbed of our homeland, mistreated at the behest of rabble-rousers, stolen from and turned into 'prisoners of war',
We are proud and German and remain steadfast: 'Yes, we are free!'
We are free, and shall never more become slaves, Germans fight for the Rights of Man.
Down with hypocrites and tyranny! 'Yes, we are free!'
The veil is lifted from our eyes, we have been derided, abused and lied to,
Now the cry of stupidity no longer troubles us: 'Yes, we shall remain free!'
We are free like the birds in their soaring flight, we are free from English greed and deceit.
German victories and German thinking, wherever it may be, make the world and the seas free!'

A murmur of approval came as thanks for these well-intended verses; even the wretched dwarf clapped his little hands together. All this made me melancholy, this flapping of the wings of idealism, a helpless fluttering in the cage. After one-and-a-hours we arrived in *Southend-on-Sea*. Here the whole platform was swarming with soldiers and officers. The ranks of soldiers stood three feet deep with bayonets fixed, and lined the edge of the streets we had to march through. The houses of the recently Zeppelined small town were full to the brim with inquisitive people, and threats and curses poured down on us from all windows, as if it had been we who had dropped the bombs. Photographers took pictures of our procession through the town for the newspapers, and tomorrow at breakfast millions of respectable citizens will look at these pictures and think: 'We really do have a splendid government, full of action, don't you think!' The great public is like [p. 102] the sea, which roars and wants its victims. The newspaper boys cry out shrilly: 'Loss of a German U-boat.' Thus we came to the pier, which stretches half a kilometre out to the river. A transfer steamer took us to the stately *Royal Edward*, a former passenger liner, which sailed between Liverpool and Toronto. Not a ship of rotting wood, then, like those of a hundred years ago, which the American prisoners were left to die off in. It had got to half-past four o'clock when we docked against it, heads popped up from every porthole. It took some time before all five hundred arrivals made it on board. All the luggage was searched through, I was in desperate fear of losing my diary, but they left it alone, while all my other possessions were 'taken away'. Then the group was split up, that is, given a social division, just of the sort that cultural life brings with it, but something I would not have expected here under these non-cultured circumstances, to wit: whoever was able to or wanted to was allocated a cabin of the first-, second-, or third class, depending on what they could pay. Everyone had to open a bank account to use these services, which for the individual was probably an advantage, as I soon found out, when the German *Line-Captain*, Herr Lutter, put me in an inside cabin, which I had to share with a German-Lloyd officer named Behrmann and a Hungarian cavalry officer called von Laisz. Then we went into the third-class, general restaurant, where there were several thousand men, puffing tobacco, playing cards, reading newspapers, all of them unfamiliar faces, some pleasant, some ordinary and some repulsive. I had not found so many different types of male amongst the English, who despite all their differences had the same basic form, while amongst these thousand German faces, almost all the racial characteristics of Europe seemed to be represented, all of them individuals, which made them interesting, but difficult to define. The food was served up in giant tin containers, the fumes coming out of which reminded me of the [p. 103] so-called 'old bone-rot stew' we had in boarding school. I came into conversation with a neighbour who had been living here for six months already, naturally about the situation with the War, 'whatever you find in the English papers, it's all lies, we have German reports here, which sound quite different, the War won't last for much longer, I tell you, young man.' At half-past eight, I went back to my cabin, where Herr von Laisz and Herr Behrmann were already in their bunks and reading. At nine o'clock the lights were put out. During the night, the soldiers, who were coming back drunk from the shore, created an infernal row in the guardroom.

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'*Southend-on-Sea, H.M.T. Royal Edward, May 1915*'

I have been here a week already now on the prison-ship. I am lying up in the bed of my cabin and am writing, with the light on, since my cabin has no windows. For the first few days, I ate in the mess-room, but, for a small monetary consideration, Herr von Laisz is having his food brought to him from the Officers' kitchen, and so I take my meals with him on a table made up of two drawers and a towel over them. In the mornings, a cabin boy brings porridge and hot water, the latter for you to use with your cocoa. The Hungarian is hugely talkative. He wakes me in the mornings with the call: 'Yo-ung Mahn get upp!' he then tells me about his racing stable in America, and the life on his Hungarian estate, *Kassacin*. He had been taken off ship when coming across on a neutral steamer, and imprisoned first of all in Gibraltar. — He had never been on English territory! In the same way, Herr Behrmann was taken by the English off his Lloyd steamer, at a point from which he could see Barcelona, when the ship was on its way to Genoa at the end of July (!).[iii]

From nine to eleven and from two to four o'clock all prisoners had to be on deck, that's when you see Southend lying to the right in the morning [p. 104] and to the left in the evening, which is because the tide swings the ship around. That's the only movement it does make now; it is held fast in the same way as we are. A second prison-ship is anchored nearby; it is the penal ship the *Saxonia*, an ancient crate. On my second day here, I straightaway saw a man who had been beaten bloody being taken across there; they say it was a Jew called Saalfeld, who had informed the English of his comrades' conversations. There was something especially distressing about this lynch-law. There are enough violent elements on board, many from Whitechapel, whom on land you wouldn't wish to meet on your own. And two torpedo boats stand ready and at English garrison's disposal, for its protection. If a more serious disturbance should occur, they had orders to fire, as the Commandant so often threatened. There is particular hate for the English censor, who keeps back mail as he thinks fit; that's what happened to a card from Fouracre. Young Del…, son of a champagne firm, whom I got to know, thought he had known the present censor as a former waiter in Wiesbaden. Now he's serving the English as a spy. The little Champagne Prince looks himself like a champagne cork, he is only twenty-three years old, small, fat, with red chubby cheeks and eyes like plums, in a completely childlike face. He was on his way back from a business trip to Argentina, and had no inkling that war had broken out, until he was taken off his ship on the high seas by the English, and dragged off to the casemates of Gibraltar. He, too, has never set one foot in England, but the 'open sea' is English 'territorial possession', if one dare express it so. The Champagne Prince has a penchant for nobility, and hopes to get letters of nobility from the Kaiser, but was very disappointed when I revealed to him that the coronet he would get would probably only turn out to be one with three prongs on it.[iv] It was a shame, that he had not got his father's champagne cellar at his disposal here, to raise our spirits. Thus I made several [p. 105] acquaintances on the promenade deck; conversing with them was a need and a benefit, after the long loneliness of London. There was a Herr Masberger from Hannover, early twenties, but wants to grow a full beard, which he won't then shave off until the end of his imprisonment. He had been a bank clerk in New York and, like all other Germans who wished to rush from America to the German flag, he was 'nabbed' off a neutral steamer. Over time, he had acquired in his parcels the 'War reports of the *Dresden Newspaper*'; which had somehow escaped the censor's attention. These, although they were month old already, I devoured secretly with great hunger in my cabin, and found to my great satisfaction that they sounded as sure of victory as the reports in the English papers, which since the beginning of the War had been my only source of information. But if the warring Powers are really equally strong, and each one is as sure of victory as the other, it then follows that the War will have to be continued up to the most terrible defeat of one side or the other, and to do that that, the War will have to go on for nobody knows how long, until somewhere a sign of common sense appears, and already now Italians' neutrality is getting shaky, because the time limit for the Triple Alliance is approaching its end.

What a fearful prospect, if new combatants keep coming into the arena, if Europe becomes the battle-ground of all the continents, just as Germany itself was in the Thirty Years' War. Masberger is of the opposite opinion, he thinks this would only accelerate the War's end, but I can't go along with his optimism. In the afternoon, I played *Doppelkopf* [v] with Masberger, and got to know Herr St. and Herr v. Am. as fellow players. The first looks like a stork, and walks like one, his manners are like those of the former chief steward of the Mecklenburg Court: solemn, amiable and restrained. Herr v. Am. also does not disown the manners of his former post as a first lieutenant, but as the owner of a sheep-farm [p. 106] in Argentina, he shows himself to be far more easy-going. But he drinks too much, and falls into fits of raving madness, so that for safety's sake he gets locked up in his cabin, so that his raving and his fearful cursing of England will not lead to any evil consequences for him, such as imprisonment on the penal ship *Saxonia*, something the Commandant has twice threatened him with already.

Every afternoon at 5 o'clock, the Dutch mail steamer comes up the Thames, which otherwise has no other shipping on it, and is followed by longing eyes. An old sailor told me that he was a Dane by nationality, but had still been interned. A month earlier, his wife had written to him, to tell him of the death of his only child, which he knew nothing about, because he had jumped ship at night and swum across to a Dutch schooner. He had been shot at, and hit in the arm; he was picked up by a boat, and taken to hospital. The following day he was to be put on the *Saxonia*. Strange individual tales of fate! And there is a sixteen-year-old gymnast on board, Robert Malter from Frankfurt on Main, he helps with the washing up in the kitchen and brings out porridge in the mornings, for those people who give him a tip. He told me had been in the top form at grammar school, but had been caught gambling, and following this he had moved out to London at the end of July, and on the first day following the declaration of war, he had been thrown into jail. He has no money, and because of that he sleeps deep down at the bottom of the ship, together with seamen and dockworkers from Whitechapel: the poor fellow. He has tried everything to be exchanged back to Germany, and he still is only very young, but none of the German or English authorities have ever — so he says — taken any notice of this. 'And I do so much want to be back there.'

I like talking, too, with Herr Karlsruhe from Buenos Aires, who knows my father's friend, Herr Kremer, the founder of A.E.G.[vi] over there; he always says, when I ask him: 'How long will it still last?' [p. 107] 'At cherry-ripe time, that's when we'll be back home.' Today he advised me to go and see the doctor, then I would get good food. A dozen patients were waiting in the corridor; when it finally got to my turn, the 'assistant', a former pharmacist, wanted to get rid of me quickly. 'What's up with you?' 'I've got stomach pains and would like to move on to sick-person's food.' To that he replied: 'Ah, that last bit's what you've really come for'. He gave me a spoonful of liquorice powder, and no piece of paper. 'Yes, you ought to have pushed the pharmacist to one side, and gone straight to the doctor,' said Herr Karlsruhe, 'stupid, that I didn't tell you that before'. I developed terrible abdominal pains, and it took me a long time in the night in the dark to find the W.C.

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'*H.M.T. Royal Edward, May 1915*'

In the mornings now I join in with general athletics exercises, which Mr. Kretzschmer from the German School in Mexico organises on deck. While joining in, I made the acquaintance of Herr Heck, a completely crazy, and a millionaire's son from Vienna. He was on a journey around the world, when he was nabbed and pulled in. He understands nothing about the War, and we don't dare speak to him about it. He mostly sits on a chaise longue and stares into space. Whether he is thinking, and if so what he is thinking, cannot be ascertained. He acts as though he is still on a luxury liner travelling round the world, and has turned completely in on himself. The others like to rag him, frighten him, provoke him, but he shrugs everything off. On that same afternoon, he'd forgotten who I was. Against that, Herr Tochus is really something different, St. said that he liked to hear his own voice, and true, I was soon hemmed in by him. He told me he was the representative in England of Ullstein's Books,[vii] and had been sent to set up a branch for them in New York. In [p. 108] his morning-coat and top-hat, he had been picked up directly off the street in London, and dragged to Olympia, the sports palace turned prison-camp, to appear before Lord Landsdown, the Commandant. His gentlemanly demeanour and his capacity as representative of Ullstein's did, however, cause the Lord to pause and to seek out special accommodation for him, and he was given a letter of recommendation, which he took along to the Commandant of the 'Royal Edward'. In the evening there was a reception at Del…'s in his splendid outer cabin. Am., St., and Tochus I knew already, an operetta singer performed arias from the *Count of Luxembourg* and the *Dollar-Princess*, then Dr. Brandt appeared, a German-Mexican with turned-up jet-black mustachios and with fingers full of rings, which he liked to flash out when he stroked his beard. He is a jingoist, and a raconteur of top-rank anecdotes; everything he has about him, ring, club-ribbon on his watch chain, necktie, and so on, has the show on it of the black-white-red of the Imperial German colours, and he particularly annoys the English by pretending that he does not understand one word of English. He is proud, too, of his beer-paunch and bald head, which despite his being only thirty years old he already possesses as a souvenir of his happy youth. He has begun a drama club, and was wanting to put on Schiller's *Wallenstein's Camp*. I let myself be talked into playing a boy-soldier, who has only four words to say. A female

impersonator, dressed up as Carmen, had appeared with Dr. Brandt, and performed a wild Spanish dance, intended to put flame into Dr. Brandt. 'You will be Gustel of Blasewitz',[viii] he decided there and then.

While we were talking in this way, smoking and drinking tea, there was an enormous explosion. 'Zeppelins!', everyone shouted, and we pressed our heads to the portholes, but we couldn't see anything. Outside, everyone was running through the gangways, out on to the deck. Where Sheerness was located, there rose a thick cloud of powder smoke. It wasn't until the following day that we discovered an English warship had blown up, taking six hundred men with it.[ix] [p. 109] The English keep their gunpowder in silk sacks, so that the explosion was the result of negligence.

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'*H.M.T. Royal Edward, May 1915*'

A splendid Whitsun[x] morning, the clearest sky, then the news flashed down on us that Italy had declared war on Austria. This news had spread like wildfire, and everyone ran into the mess-hall, to find out the details. The War also was spreading like wildfire. I have to say, nothing since the beginning of the World War had shaken me as much as this latest news. But at that time there had been hope getting back to Germany, but now that is no longer the case. At that time, too, people believed that everything would be over by Christmas, now an iron curtain has descended before the future. Dr. Brandt had immediately assumed command of the political situation, and on his own declared war on Italy; he led the armies of Germany and Austria — at least with his words — like Blackbeard the Pirate in a move before Rome. Herr v. Am., who once more had had too much to drink, and for his own part began by cursing Englishmen, was gently persuaded away by his friends, from all the commotion. Suddenly a sergeant appeared with two Tommies, who dragged Dr. Brandt out. At first he gesticulated wildly, and then assumed an attitude of pride. After this, a sailor sat down at the piano and thumped out a march. At this, we all sang *Hail To Thee In Victor's Crown*, and when the food was brought in the excitement died down, to some extent. Herr St. informed me that Dr. Brandt had been taken down to the middle of the ship, as a punishment. That has been a happy festival, this first Whitsuntide of the War!

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[p. 110]

'*H.M.T. Royal Edward, May 1915*'

This evening Herr von Laisz was phantasising, and telling us how he would march to Italy with the Honvéd Hussars:[xi] 'We'll destroy everything there is there; we have come from Asia, and are the best riders in the world. Attila the Great was my ancestor, he destroyed everything.' At nine o'clock the lights went out. Still in his dreams, I heard Herr v. Laisz giving out orders in Hungarian; Behrmann, from Bremen, shouted out grouchily to him: 'Shut y'r trap.' But I had scarcely fallen asleep, before a dull thud woke us all up. What else had happened now? Boom, boom! Zeppelin over Southend![xii] Everywhere suddenly leapt into life. Drums rattled, orders were sounded out; soldiers with Bayonets moved through all gangways, looked in at all the cabins, and shouted out: '*Lights out, keep quiet*.' Boom! once more came the hollow droning noise. Again the drums rattled. Since we had no lights, we lay in pitch darkness, and couldn't see anything. 'Let's hope a bomb drops on the Old Man's head,' Behrmann said jovially. 'The torpedo boats will be shooting', called out Herr von Laisz. 'Damned Englishmen.' He rushed off in the dark towards the corridor, but was beaten back immediately with the butt of a rifle. Meanwhile, no further explosions followed. Because of the heat and the excitement, we were awake the whole night through.

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'*H.M.T. Royal Edward, May 1915*'

When in the morning Robert Malter brought the porridge and hot water, we all believed it had been a dream. At nine o'clock we all had to be up on deck. The sun shone in its splendour; Southend lay to the left; we thought we could see smoke, for in fact a Zeppelin attack really had taken place during the night. The Commandant, Colonel de Cordes, with a dark look, [p. 111] went across with a lady typist to the mainland; the censor was particularly polite and gave me a picture-postcard from Alberta in Richmond. The English newspapers have dared to make attacks on Lord Kitchener; Churchill has, for the moment, been sacked; he'll be back again, you can count on it, this English Alcibiades. Dr. Brandt was allowed to show his face again; he put on a deadly serious expression and walked, like Cassandra, lonely and alone, up and down. In general, the mood today has been extremely depressed.

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'*H.M.T. Royal Edward, May 1915*'

It is strange to see in the afternoons a countless number of boats flitting around our ship, full of inquisitive people, mostly ladies with parasols, who want to show they have the courage to take a closer look at 'the Huns'. Some even wave, and act offended, if some sailor or workman or other returns the greeting with '*Halloo, deary*'.

The rehearsals for *Wallenstein's Camp* have begun, a small stage has been set up in the crew's compartment. Herr Hussner directs, Dr. Brandt rehearses Pappenheimer, Tochus takes on the Capuchin monk, young Malter portrays a waitress, and I rehearse my six words, over and over again.

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'*H.M.T. Royal Edward, May 1915*'

Today is the Première, in the presence and with the 'gracious permission' of the Lord Commandant, Colonel de Cordes, and his adjutant Captain McCullough. I'm just rushing off to see Schönborn, the theatre's hairdresser, who up to his internment had a big shop in Regent Street, and had dealt personally with all the great singers in Covent Garden, from Mme. Tetrazzini [p 112] and Caruso, to Haensel, Nikisch and Geraldine Farrar. — The play was a great success, despite the fact that the Commandant did not turn up, which is why the three easy chairs in the front row were left empty. Our helmets and armour for the play were made from tin-cans, the leather from cardboard, the feathers from paper. Dr. Brandt as Pappenheimer played himself, Dr. Bund, the old copper-mine owner from Brazil, got good solid kicks in his role as Bauer. I sat next to a cauldron, in the void of which I poked about with a large spoon. I only needed to say: 'Mother, are you referring to my father?' which came out so stuttered that I had to laugh, with the result that everyone laughed along with me. At the end of the play, the choir sang: 'Be well, companions: to horse! Into the field, marching into freedom…' But then that had a sad effect, since we were all captives who could not do anything of the sort.

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'*H.M.T. Royal Edward, May 1915*'

The day after tomorrow we're going to have to quit the ship, it has to take English troops to Egypt. You've scarcely managed to live yourself in, before you're off again; where to, that's kept secret. Some of us think we'll be moving to the *Saxonia*, and she was placed at anchor in the Thames Estuary, to prevent the Germans from laying any mines. Well, that's as may be. Von Am. invited us to a farewell drinking session, only St. and Del… prudently declined to attend. Because it got a bit rowdy. The whisky bottle did its rounds. Dr. Brandt told dirty jokes, and was the one who laughed most about them; Hussner, the operetta director, who always wears a heavy grey seaman's sweater and has the rack-and-ruined face of an actor, trumpeted out objectionable items, at which, however, nobody took offence; Masberger played a guitar, Lehne, the Yankee, bestowed nasal American [p. 113] negro-songs upon us. The mood rose to still greater heights, when the female impersonator appeared once more as Carmen, and Dr. Brandt wanted to ascertain for sure whether Carmen really was, as they said, a hermaphrodite. The others helped him in this task. (The clamour!) The beautiful gown was torn more and more to shreds. One man tumbled over the other. I left before the end, and on deck one could breathe fresh air. Heck, the millionaire, asked me, whether we would soon be in Honolulu: I answered, first there would be the Sandwich Islands. He nodded really seriously at that.

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i Ascension Day 1915: May 13th.

ii H.M.T. 'Hired Military Transport'; on hire from the Canadian Northern Steamship Company, where it had been a Royal Mail SteamerS (R.M.S).

iii July 1914, before the commencement of war on 4 August 1914.

iv *Dreizackinge Krone*: one of the lowest grade.

v *Doppelkopf*: a German card game for 4 players ['double-head'].

vi *A.E.G.*: *Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft* ('General Electric Company'), founded in Berlin on 19 April 1883 as *Deutsche Edison-Gesellschaft für angewandte Elektrizität* ('German Edison Company for Applied Electricity').

vii Begun as a newspaper subsidiary in Berlin by Leopold Ullstein, 1877.

viii Johanne Justine Renner (1763-1856), female acquaintance of Friedrich Schiller, whom he called 'Gustel of Blaswitz'.

ix The ship was HMS *Princess Irene*, which exploded off Sheerness, 27 May 1915, with 352 deaths.

x Whitsunday 23 May 1915, Whit Monday (public holiday) 24 May 1915.

xi Honvéd Hussars: one of four units of the Austrian-Hungarian army.

xii Thursday 27 May 1915: raid on Southend and Westcliffe.

Background

Any comments, errors or omissions gratefully received The Editor

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